

**AIR WAR COLLEGE**

**AIR UNIVERSITY**

**Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962**

**By**

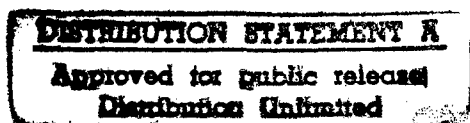
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**A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY**

**IN**

**FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM**

**REQUIREMENT**



Advisor: Dr. Robert H. Small

**MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA**

**14 April 1995**

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Accession Number: 6112

Publication Date: Apr 14, 1995

Title: Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

Personal Author: Werder, K.K.

Corporate Author Or Publisher: Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL

Report Prepared for: Faculty, Air War College, in fulfillment of the curriculum requirement

Abstract: There are many lessons that can still be learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis. There is no other incident of this magnitude between the Superpowers, that can be considered representative of effective crisis management and national security decision making.

Descriptors, Keywords: Cuban Missile Crisis Kennedy Krushchev crisis management superpowers lessons

Pages: 30

Cataloged Date: Dec 11, 1996

Copyrighted or Not: N

Document Type: HC

Number of Copies In Library: 000001

Record ID: 43059

## Table of Contents

|                               |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Disclaimer . . . . .          | ii  |
| Executive Summary . . . . .   | iii |
| Biographical Sketch . . . . . | iv  |

### Chapter

|   |    |
|---|----|
| I. Introduction . . . . .                                       | 1  |
| II. Khrushchev's Gamble - Missile Deployment . . . . .          | 6  |
| III. Kennedy's Objectives and Strategy . . . . .                | 10 |
| IV. The Role of Intelligence - Successes and Failures . . . . . | 15 |
| V. Conclusions . . . . .  | 22 |
| Appendix: Maps. . . . .   | 26 |
| Bibliography . . . . .  | 29 |

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## Executive Summary

In what was the most serious "clash" during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union came dangerously close to thermonuclear war when their Superpower rivalry manifested itself with the placement of nuclear weapons on the Island of Cuba in October 1962. This potentially cataclysmic incident brought policy makers on both sides to seriously question their use of diplomacy, intelligence, nuclear weapons, military force, and to moderate their somewhat simplistic foreign policy rhetoric of national interests. Both sides had advanced to the edge of the precipice overlooking nuclear war, and had stepped back; staunchly determined to avoid any possibilities of a reoccurrence.

In an article written by Mr. Eliot A. Cohen, "Why We Should Stop Studying the Cuban Missile Crisis," Mr. Cohen argues that this incident should no longer be considered by political-military students of history as the classic case model for national security decision-making. Mr. Cohen argues that "the Cuban Missile Crisis is and will remain singularly un-representative of post-war crises, and it offers precious little historical guidance for American statesmen today." I disagree with Mr. Cohen.

I believe there are many lessons that can still be learned from the Cuban Missile Crisis. First, in the absence of another incident of this magnitude between the Superpowers, what other event can be considered representative of effective crisis management and national security decision making? Secondly, the strategic intelligence advantage that President John F. Kennedy held over his adversary, Nikita Khrushchev, proved to be a decisive difference. Kennedy knew when Khrushchev was lying, what his capabilities were, and just as important, what they were not.

Additionally, in this day and age of high-tech, "Third Wave" theories of our national ability to depend upon technical intelligence collection and information warfare, Colonel Oleg Penkovsky stands as a classic example of the value of human intelligence operations. Without the information on Soviet missiles, launchers, and associated equipment that Colonel Penkovsky provided to the Central Intelligence Agency, American intelligence analysts could not have assured President Kennedy that he had three days to think about the problem and his options. In those three days, Kennedy wisely chose to continue his dialogue with Khrushchev, a dialogue that ended in a Soviet agreement to remove the missiles from Cuba.

In the intervening thirty-three years since the Cuban Missile Crisis, despite serious international friction's, there has not been another incident like it. In geopolitics, the interests of great powers often collide. Crisis management is necessary if crises arise, but crisis prevention and crisis avoidance based on political restraint and accommodations of differences are much to be preferred. Arms control agreements, strategic arms reduction agreements, and improved communications are all positive steps along this pathway. So is knowing what the other fellow is about to do.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Mr. Karl K. Werder, GS-15 Civilian (Bachelor's of Business Administration, The George Washington University) has been interested in the events of the Cold War, especially the Cuban Missile Crisis, since joining the Foreign Service in 1983. He has served in assignments overseas in Central America, Africa, and the Middle East. He is married and lives in Washington, D.C. Mr. Werder is a graduate of the Air War College, class of 1995.

"Now, as to Cuba--there's a place that could  
really lead to some unexpected consequences."

-- Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev  
6 September 1962



## Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

### Chapter One

#### Introduction

In what was unquestionably the most serious "clash" during the period known as the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union came dangerously to the brink of thermonuclear war when the relentless rivalry between East and West manifested itself with the placement of Soviet nuclear weapons on the Island of Cuba in October of 1962. This potentially cataclysmic incident brought policy makers on both sides of the Iron Curtain to seriously question and review their strategic policies for the use of nuclear weapons and military forces, to adjust their use and understanding of diplomatic channels of communication, to continue their development of better, more sophisticated intelligence gathering platforms and humint sources, and to moderate their somewhat simplistic rhetoric of foreign policy goals, objectives, and stated national interests. Both sides had steadfastly marched to the edge of the precipice overlooking nuclear war, and had stepped back; staunchly determined to avoid any possibilities of a similar occurrence in the future. (5: Preface p. *vii*) For this courageous decision and subsequent actions, future generations and the world can be grateful.

In a crude, unsophisticated, and poorly thought out maneuver, the Soviet leadership attempted to clandestinely place an imposing medium range nuclear strike force into Cuba, constructing it rapidly before the United States realized the threat or could react to its construction, thus allowing the Soviets to present the United States, fait accompli, a relative position of nuclear superiority (or at least closer parity) in the Western hemisphere, as advance warning in case of an attack would be all but eliminated. The Soviet deployment of these medium range missiles, along with other military and naval bases constructed in Cuba during this period, were not merely for the defense of Cuba, but

were an international extension of Soviet military power into the Western hemisphere, thus directly challenging the (Premier) leadership position of the United States in both its hemispheric and global positions. This move was a gamble--would the United States military and intelligence arms learn of the program's existence in time to adequately respond? If the operation was compromised, what response might a young president, already considered "weak" by Soviet leadership, be able to articulate and press into service? Several other international events managed by this "inexperienced" president, between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba conspired to lead the Soviets into taking this reckless gamble, and they lost.

The Soviet Union completely misjudged the character and resolve of the U.S. presidency, the mood of the country, and most importantly, U.S. intelligence capabilities to learn what was really happening in both Cuba and the Soviet Union. The U.S. public could not have tolerated the acceptance of an offensive missile base ninety miles from our shores, and any president would have been obliged to take strong actions. Further, the United States could not have tolerated such a base without seriously degrading its claim to its leadership position in the world. (5: Preface p. vii)

In the first trimester curriculum of the 1995 Air War College, an article written by Mr. Eliot A. Cohen, "Why We Should Stop Studying the Cuban Missile Crisis," was assigned to all students for reading and subsequent seminar discussion. In his article, Mr. Cohen argues that this strategic incident should no longer be considered by students of political-military history as "the classic case model for national security decision-making." Mr. Cohen continues, "The Cuban Missile Crisis is and will remain singularly unrepresentative of post-war crises, and it offers precious little historical guidance for American statesmen today." (10:6)

Mr. Cohen outlines three reasons for the popularity of serious, academic inquiry into the sequence of events in October of 1962, and then proceeds to dismiss these reasons as irrelevant or immaterial. Mr. Cohen's first position is the, "unusual quality and

quantity of information available" to the scholar. (10:4) Admittedly, Mr. Cohen does indeed have a point here; to wit, there are numerous books, articles, and thoughtful eye-witness analyses that have been published on the topic of the Cuban Missile Crisis since 1962, and within the last year or so, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) declassified many of its top secret documents pertaining to this crisis, providing even more detailed documentation to the historian, political scientist, or professional military student. But an abundance of information should not, in and of itself, negate the validity of continued study of this event. Arguing that too much available information somehow degrades the importance of an event is not particularly sound logic in my judgment.

Mr. Cohen's second contention is that the event is steeped in heavy, almost cinematic drama, "A vividness and excitement unmatched by almost any other post-war event." (10:4) A simple plot studded with movie-star personalities, the whole incident unfolds and is resolved in just under two short weeks. Major players such as the handsome, young U.S. President John F. Kennedy, the pugnacious and thuggish Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, and the mysterious revolutionary guerrilla leader, Fidel Castro provide dramatic performances in the crisis scenario. Khrushchev deploys missiles into Cuba, Kennedy confronts him and demands their removal; Khrushchev ultimately relents and withdraws the missiles. Fascinating sub-plots add just enough interest and complexity to complete the thespian comparison, and "Like any good play, the crisis has an easily discerned beginning, middle, and end." (10:4)

Finally, Mr. Cohen suggests a third reason for the popularity of continued study of the missile crisis, that the crisis remains the last major, indisputable, and widely applauded success of American arms since the Inchon landings in September 1950, during the Korean War. (The reader should please note that Mr. Cohen's article was written and published in 1985, five years before Operation Desert Shield and the dramatically successful military action, Desert Storm.) The frustrating experience in Vietnam following the Cuban Missile Crisis, when compared with the smaller, seemingly inconsequential military interventions

in the Dominican Republic and even Grenada, provided little solace for political-military historians and political leaders in the courses of their studies. Prior to the Gulf war, only the Missile Crisis stood as a clear, "recent" national military success, the Kennedy administration handled the unexpected threat to American security with decisiveness, determination, wisdom, and prudence. Ultimately, the Soviets were coerced to withdraw their missiles without receiving any public quid pro quo from the United States. (10:4)

Mr. Cohen's points, with the one exception of an "over"-abundance of data, are certainly worthy of academic consideration. However, even when tempered by Mr. Cohen's thoughtful arguments, there appear to be significant lessons that can yet be learned by War College students through continued study of this incident. Whether or not the Cuban Missile Crisis should be lauded as "the one and only way" to conduct crisis management is certainly open to debate. However, I believe that there are many important lessons that can be drawn from continued study of this incident. Interestingly, these lessons revolve around many of the themes of the 1995 Air War College curriculum; leadership, doctrine, strategy, technology, political-military integration, air and space power, and joint war fighting. Any one, or all, of these themes could be used to analyze and dissect the chronology of events and actions taken during the crisis. Perhaps just as interesting, the missile crisis itself had profound effects on subsequent U.S. strategic thought, policies, and the very applications of each of these thematic topics. What Americans expect from their national leaders, both political and military, were permanently altered by the Cuban Missile Crisis. International diplomacy between the Superpowers was changed forever, from the installation of the "hot line" communications system between Moscow and Washington to transmit rapid exchanges of correspondence (designed to prevent future misunderstandings of Superpower intent or deed), to President Richard M. Nixon's establishment of détente with the Soviet Union and his recognition of the People's Republic of China, all of these events can be traced directly to the Missile Crisis of October 1962. Certainly much of the American military's technological

development in last three decades was spawned in the wake of the missile crisis; advanced nuclear weapons and missile designs, new intelligence satellites, reconnaissance aircraft, and even stealth technology, probably owe their existence to this crisis. The incident validated President Kennedy's strategy of "flexible response" and again proved the value of combined (joint) military operations in meeting a direct threat to the United States.

Superimposed over all of these themes, and unfortunately an item sorely missing from the 1995 Air War College curriculum, is the supreme value of strategic intelligence targeting, collection, analysis, and dissemination to the policy-maker and war-fighter. For without this crucial information, thoughtfully analyzed and disseminated to the decision-makers, resolution of such a crisis becomes a mere guessing game with potentially catastrophic consequences.

This research paper will therefore attempt to analyze the Cuban Missile Crisis in light of the national security decision making (crisis management) of the U.S. and Soviet political leadership during this incident, and most importantly, this paper will address the critical role of all-source strategic intelligence in resolving such crises, demonstrating that additional lessons can indeed be learned from continued study of this incident.

## Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

### Chapter Two

#### Missile Deployment - Khrushchev's Gamble

The Soviet attempt to deploy some 42 medium-range and 24 to 32 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM's) into Cuba during the late summer and early fall of 1962 triggered the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War. This confrontation between the Superpowers, unforeseen and unwanted by either side, was eventually resolved peacefully through careful crisis management by the political leadership in both Washington and Moscow. The incident is even today, over thirty years after the fact, a frightening and sobering episode in the titanic struggle between East and West that was embodied in the Cold War. What is most frightening is that each side's national security decision makers virtually stumbled into a war-threatening crisis, with the very real potential for a nuclear exchange. Given that so dangerous a crisis was unforeseen and unwanted by both sides, it is important to understand how it came about. (15:222)

The Soviets had never stationed medium-range or intermediate-range nuclear missiles in the territories of other nations, not even in the territories of their Warsaw Pact allies. In the mind of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, there were probably several reasons for attempting the secret installation of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, just over the horizon of the United States. First among these was undoubtedly a personal assessment of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, obtained over the previous fifteen months. Khrushchev had been sparring with the young president since the beginning of Kennedy's administration, most notably with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April 1961 and again, over the permanent division of Berlin and the construction of the infamous and much hated Berlin wall. Kennedy's apparent lack of will and determination in providing U.S. air support to the Bay of Pigs invasion may have led Khrushchev to believe that

Kennedy was a weak character. However, Kennedy's determination and mettle were better demonstrated to the Soviet Premier by the spring of 1962, when the two men met at their summit in Vienna. Kennedy was tough and effective in outlining U.S. and the West's position on the status of Berlin, added to this, Kennedy was effective in his use of American military initiatives during the period 1961-62. (13:22) But perhaps even more enlightening than Khrushchev's possible psycho-analysis of President Kennedy's strengths and weaknesses, was that medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles placed in Cuba could hit targets in the United States, such as Washington or New York, but they could not hit Moscow, in the unlikely event of a Cuban "mutiny." (24:332)

It is more likely that the deployment of strategic weapons into Cuba was a "quick-fix" measure designed to achieve a substantial improvement in Soviet strike capabilities against the United States. (11:136) On a spring day in 1962, while vacationing at a dacha in the Crimea, Khrushchev was visited by Defense Minister Rodion Ya. Malinovsky. Malinovsky drew Khrushchev's attention to the installation (and nearly completed operational status) of American Jupiter missiles just over the horizon, across the Black Sea in Turkey. He pointed out that American nuclear missiles would be able to strike their targets within the Soviet Union in ten minutes, while Soviet missiles required twenty-five minutes to reach the United States. Khrushchev thought over Malinovsky's remarks, why should Americans have the right to emplace missiles on his doorstep, and he not have a comparable right? The Americans, after all, had not asked for, nor had they received, Soviet permission to do so. A few weeks later, while in Bulgaria, Khrushchev carried the point one step further, why not place Soviet medium-range and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba? (20:41) Khrushchev's idea was to deploy a small number of medium and intermediate range missiles secretly into Cuba, then suddenly disclose their presence to the United States and to the world as a fait accompli. (13:13)

In subsequent discussions among the Soviet party hierarchy, several reasons were presented to Khrushchev as why such a move would be unwise, including that such

actions would be considered provocative by the United States. It was believed that the United States would surely detect the construction and placement of such missiles in nearby Cuba, before the missiles could be made operational, and it was also believed that Cuban leader Fidel Castro was unlikely to approve such a deployment. Khrushchev brushed aside these considerations, deciding to raise the issue with Castro and if he resisted the idea, to drop the matter entirely. In the meantime, Khrushchev ordered a Soviet military mission to Cuba to scout out the terrain, and the conditions of shipment and emplacement, to determine whether the deployment could be made in secrecy. (13:13)

The proposal was cleverly put to Castro as an offer of military support, "All the way up to deploying Soviet medium-range [nuclear] missiles," on Cuban territory, if the Cubans considered that would be a useful measure to deter, "The potential aggressor," from attack. Castro, evidently fearing additional attacks from the United States, agreed. (13:16) Castro had good reason for such fears. In the wake of the fiasco at Bay of Pigs, Kennedy ordered the CIA to begin clandestine efforts (Operation Mongoose) to overthrow the Communist regime in Cuba. CIA-handled saboteurs based in the Florida Keys called Alpha 66, repeatedly attacked the island in hit and run actions along the coast. CIA anti-Castro operations included sabotage of goods shipped to Cuba, arranging for European suppliers to produce faulty equipment (such as off-center ball bearings), and included several plots to kill Fidel Castro. Unfortunately, these operations had the effect of driving Castro and Cuba even farther into the Soviet sphere, allowing Castro to assume greater political centralization and more state management. (21:137-139)

There is little evidence to demonstrate that anyone in the Soviet leadership considered what would happen if the missiles were discovered by the Americans before they could be made operational. The available record gives no indication of advance contingency planning for that possibility. Apparently, Khrushchev and his advisers assumed that in the unlikely event that the deployment was discovered before it was completed, the initial U.S. response would be at the diplomatic level, rather than a military



response. If the U.S. responded in this diplomatic manner, the graver risk of a shooting war could be avoided until a later point in the crisis, allowing Moscow to control the situation, defuse the incident, and hopefully obtain concessions or payoffs in the bargain. This does not imply that the Soviets believed this action to be without risk, but they evidently did believe that the risk was easily manageable. As it turned out, the risk was manageable, but it was not easy. (15:225)

In deciding to install the missiles secretly, Khrushchev failed to understand that while the Soviets had a good case for contending that the introduction of missiles into Cuba was legal and was comparable to U.S. actions in Turkey, the Soviet's use of secrecy and deception would undercut the rationale of normalcy and legitimacy. If it was all aboveboard, why do it surreptitiously? That was not comparable to what the United States had done. One can only imagine the potential glee that Khrushchev would have felt in presenting a sudden fait accompli to the president and the political impact that would have had on the world, but Khrushchev did not adequately recognize the risks of premature American discovery and announcement of the secret activity. (13:24)

It is noteworthy that Fidel Castro strongly urged Khrushchev to make the deployment of the missiles and other Soviet military support measures public from the outset, but Khrushchev refused. Fidel's brother Raul and Che Guevara each made appeals to the Soviets for public disclosure, but they also were unsuccessful. (13:25)

## Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

### Chapter Three

#### Kennedy's Objectives and Strategy

Upon learning of Khrushchev's move, President John F. Kennedy quickly perceived the multiple dangers and high stakes. If the deployment of so many missiles into Cuba, carried out secretly and coupled with deception, were allowed to succeed, a variety of damaging consequences would follow for the U.S. position in the world, Kennedy's foreign and domestic policies, his ability to provide leadership during the remainder of his term in office, and for his chances for a second term. Inextricably, the prestige and interests of the United States and the prestige and political future of John F. Kennedy were merged by this action. Khrushchev could not have designed a better plan to arouse Kennedy's personal and political concerns or to ensure that they became so fused with the calculations of the national interest. Khrushchev, a noted bully, may have calculated the kind of personal and political damage that the covert deployment of missiles would inflict upon the president, assessing this damage to be worth the risks involved. (15:226)

In the late summer of 1962, the Kennedy administration was placed under increasingly severe domestic pressure to take stronger actions against Fidel Castro. The Republicans had announced that Cuba would be the dominant issue in the midterm Congressional elections in November. The administration sought to reassure the public that the dangers of the [conventional] Soviet military buildup in Cuba were being exaggerated and that there was no reason to respond with war-like measures, such as a blockade. The administration disclosed considerable intelligence information concerning the character of the Soviet military supplies and personnel flowing into Cuba, hoping to assure the public that it was well informed as to what the Soviets were, and were not doing in Cuba. (15:226)

On 29 August 1962, two U-2 photo-reconnaissance aircraft were dispatched to photograph the entire island of Cuba. Although clouds obscured most of the eastern portion of the island, observations in the clear areas in the western part of Cuba triggered alert mechanisms throughout the intelligence community. Soon after placing the film on a light table at the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) in Washington, a photo-interpreter loudly noted that he had discovered a surface-to-air missile (SAM) site. Before the day was over, eight SAM sites had been discovered in various stages of construction across western Cuba. These SAM sites were located along the northern coast of Cuba, the geographic placement evidently designed to protect the entire island rather than specific key installations. This fact contradicts the position historians have often stated, that the SAM sites were deployed to protect the Soviet IRBM facilities. (5:104) However, the installation of SAM's was an escalation of weaponry that was significant. When Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), John A. McCone was briefed on the sites, he said, "They're not putting them [the SA-2 missile sites] in to protect the [sugar] cane cutters. They're putting them in to blind our reconnaissance eye." (5:105)

Shortly thereafter, Republican U.S. Senator from New York, Kenneth Keating, announced that he had reliable information that between 3 and 15 August 1962, the Soviets had delivered five torpedo boats and disembarked 1,200 troops at the port of Mariel, Cuba. Keating demanded to know what the Soviets were going to do with their new island fortress, and further, what was the Kennedy administration going to do about this development? (5:112)

President Kennedy decided to draw the line. In separate statements issued on 4 and 13 September, Kennedy explicitly warned the Soviets that he would not tolerate the introduction of offensive weapons into Cuba, publicly committing himself to act if strategic missiles were introduced into Cuba. Such a pledge was relatively easy to make, as Kennedy thought it most unlikely that the Soviets would undertake such a move, a belief reinforced by U.S. intelligence estimates and Soviet deception efforts. Once such a

stand had been taken in the heated domestic political environment, the pledge to act if challenged was virtually irrevocable. When the nuclear missiles were discovered later, in October, the United States might not have been in mortal danger, but the administration surely was. Kennedy could not back down. (15:226) Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara explicitly stated that the deployment of Soviet missiles into Cuba did not at all change the strategic balance, and that they did not constitute a "military problem" but, rather, "a domestic, political problem." Hence, Kennedy and his advisors were swayed less by the military threat posed by the missiles than by the important political-diplomatic advantages they saw accruing to Khrushchev if the nuclear missiles remained in Cuba. (15:227) On 21 August, at a meeting with Secretaries of State and Defense, DCI McCone had commented that "If I were Khrushchev, I would put MRBM's [medium-range ballistic missiles] in Cuba and I would aim several at Washington and New York and then I would say, 'Mr. President, how would you like looking down the barrels of a shotgun for a while? Now, let's talk about Berlin. Later, we'll bargain about your overseas bases.'" (5:96)

Historians generally (with the possible exception of Mr. Cohen), have noted that Kennedy followed prudent crisis management principles in dealing with the situation created by Khrushchev's gamble. The president adhered to the political requirements for dealing with crisis management; namely he limited his objectives and the means used in reaching those objectives. Kennedy firmly rejected the notion that the missile crisis demanded the overthrow of Castro, or the elimination of Soviet presence and influence on the island. Inferring that such goals would substantially increase the chances for war, Kennedy made it clear that his objective was the removal of the missiles from Cuba, no more and no less, a position he held firmly throughout the crisis. (15:227)

Although Kennedy initially favored an air strike at the outset of the crisis, he soon saw the merits of limiting not only the objective but the means to achieve it. Interest in the blockade option grew as it became an option which might achieve the removal of the

missiles without triggering a war. Kennedy also determined that a purely diplomatic maneuver, which several of his key advisors were recommending, would be ineffective and could possibly be dangerous. Khrushchev could perceive such action as an exploitable opening, and encourage him to attempt to capitalize on his investment, without understanding the seriousness of the president's intentions and regarding subsequent threats by Kennedy as mere bluff. On the other hand, direct military action would certainly result in American casualties, and perhaps trigger a strong Soviet response, leading to war. (15:228)

The one weakness of the blockade plan was that although it would prevent any additional weapons from reaching Cuba, it did little to coerce the removal of the weapons already there. This point was cogently argued by those members of the Executive Committee (or ExComm; actually a subset of members of the National Security Council personally chosen by Kennedy to assist him in resolving the crisis) who advocated the air strike option. By announcing the existence of the missiles on 22 October, a full six days after their discovery, Kennedy imposed the blockade without precisely knowing how he would convince Khrushchev to remove the missiles from Cuba, what he did know was that the blockade option provided him more options and allowed for continued application of pressure. It offered time for an effort to persuade the Soviets to remove the missiles voluntarily, thereby controlling the risk (15:228)

Thus, Kennedy played to his strengths. First, enforcing the blockade were the superior U.S. naval forces which the Soviets could not possibly match, positioned across the globe. Secondly, the U.S. held a distinct advantage in strategic nuclear weapons, which is why the Soviets placed their missiles into Cuba in the first place, a point not lost on Khrushchev. What he always had doubted was whether Kennedy and the United States would be able to summon the motivation and will to prevent his success. (15:228)

The question became how to convince the irascible Soviet Premier to forego the considerable advantages he expected to gain from the missile deployment, and how easily

he might accept the considerable loss of international prestige and the domestic costs of a conspicuous, public retreat. Firm answers to these questions were unknown in Washington. The dominant view was that Khrushchev had miscalculated the risks of his initiative and that if he was made fully aware of these risks, he would be capable of retreating and withdrawing the missiles without bloodshed. Kennedy believed that Khrushchev was a rational, intelligent man who, if given sufficient time and shown determination, would have to alter his position. History proved him to be correct in this assessment. (15:229)

## Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

### Chapter Four

#### The Role of Intelligence - Successes and Failures

On Sunday, 14 October 1962, two American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft, one of them piloted by United States Air Force (USAF) Major Rudolph Anderson, Jr. (the other, piloted by USAF Major Richard Heyser), took pictures over Cuba. One day later, startled photo-analysts at the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) in Washington concluded firmly that the Soviet Union was installing nuclear missiles in Cuba that could reach targets in the United States. After five days of analysis and discussion among a small group of selected advisors, on 20 October President Kennedy decided to impose a naval quarantine on the further delivery of offensive weapons to Cuba and to insist on the prompt withdrawal of Soviet missiles already delivered. On the evening of Monday, 22 October, he announced his decision to the country and the world. There followed a six-day international crisis of unprecedented severity in which the risk of nuclear war was greater than at any time before or since. After a series of complex, yet brief negotiations, and military moves and countermoves in which only one life was lost by hostile action (that of Major Anderson, on 27 October), the crisis was ended on Sunday, 28 October, by a public statement from Nikita Khrushchev that the missiles would be removed from Cuba. (6:391)

Strategic intelligence played a critical role in this incident, from the discovery of the first SA-2 SAM site in mid-August to the detection of the construction of a medium-range ballistic missile site in mid-October 1962. By the fall of 1962, CIA U-2 reconnaissance aircraft had achieved an impressive intelligence record, flying over the Soviet Union during the 1950's, proving decisively that the Soviet Bomber Gap was an Air Force myth. Approximately twenty American U-2 missions were flown over the Soviet Union from July 1956 until Francis Gary Powers was shot down on 1 May 1960, thus

ending overflights of Soviet airspace. The venerable U-2 again proved its value in Cuba, providing irrefutable evidence of Soviet installation of ballistic missiles.

When the Soviets first began sending weapons and armaments abroad, such equipment was frequently carried as deck cargo on merchant vessels. In an attempt to conceal and protect these shipments, the Soviets covered the weapons with packing crates or placed them in special shipping containers. Many of these cargo ships were old U.S. Liberty ships or vessels constructed in Western shipyards, and consequently, their dimensions (often their blueprints) were available to intelligence analysts. Officials at CIA and NPIC developed an expertise known as "cratology," which allowed careful analysis and measurement of such crates to determine what equipment or weapons were being shipped. By the late summer and fall of 1962, "cratology" had become firmly established as an intelligence technique. Using "cratology" and U-2 imagery, NPIC photo-interpreters were able to discern what types of Soviet weaponry was being off-loaded at the port of Mariel, and also monitor the withdrawal of the missiles in the post-crisis stage. (5:73)

With an intuitive sixth sense and a steadfast belief in the value of high-tech equipment, Director of Central Intelligence, John A. McCone was convinced that the discovery of SAM sites in mid-August presaged the installation of Soviet ballistic missiles. His insistence that Cuba be photographed as soon as possible by U-2 aircraft was a grand stroke of luck for the United States, President Kennedy, and future generations. McCone, a Republican appointee in a Democratic administration, faced heavy political skepticism for his views regarding Cuba, skepticism fueled by the impending mid-term Congressional elections to be held in November 1962. The Republican opposition, which made Cuba an issue in the campaign, was thought by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to be secretly informed by DCI McCone. Fortunately, the president trusted McCone to fulfill the duties as DCI in a professional manner and he was not disappointed. (24:331-332)

While the importance of technical intelligence should not be understated in resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis, human intelligence, or HUMINT, played a crucial role



as well. In the months prior to the shocking U-2 discoveries in August and October of 1962, thousands of Cuban refugees were pouring into Miami and other Florida cities with wild stories of "Mongol" soldiers, Russian military activity, and "missiles" in Cuba. These confused reports were alarming, especially in the wake of the Bay of Pigs disaster and the tense domestic political campaign. Some reports were the result of fertile imaginations designed to prod the United States into direct military action against Castro. Some information was almost certainly Soviet and Cuban disinformation planted among the fleeing refugees. In response to the concern these reports generated and their immense number, the intelligence community established a joint interrogation center at Opa Locka, Florida on 15 March 1962 (thirteen separate federal agencies were vying to interview each refugee). Known as the Caribbean Admission Center, this facility was administered by CIA, and interesting reports were sped to Washington for further analysis and dissemination. All categories of military activities were cataloged by the Center, and any report that appeared convincing was checked against U-2 photography. (5:86-87)

But some of the most valuable intelligence provided to President Kennedy and the United States during the crisis came from Moscow itself. Oleg Penkovsky, a GRU Colonel, played a vital role in this epic story. In the early part of 1961, Penkovsky approached a British businessman with an offer to "work" for Western intelligence. Penkovsky began his espionage career for British and American intelligence service after a lengthy and frustrating experience establishing his bona fides as a worthwhile intelligence asset. From the very beginning of his espionage relationship, Penkovsky passed to Western intelligence officers descriptions and diagrams of the latest Soviet missiles and associated launchers, provided general design plans for the construction of launch sites, discussed the latest information on Soviet experimental rocket fuels, and even raised the possibility of Soviet installation of missiles into Cuba, fully eighteen months before the Cuban Missile Crisis. (24:81-93)

Penkovsky provided the first reliable human intelligence on Soviet missile strength. His information came at a time when satellite information was just being assembled and evaluated, after the curtailment of U-2 overflights caused by the Powers shootdown in May 1960. He provided a rational explanation to accompany the emerging satellite evidence, which led to a revision [downward] of a National Intelligence Estimate on Soviet missile strength in the fall of 1961. His reporting was later fully corroborated by satellite imagery and disproved the "Missile Gap" believed to exist between the Soviet Union and the United States. (24:101)

Over the course of his espionage, Penkovsky passed manuals and blueprints of Soviet missiles and related equipment. His work was deemed so sensitive that distribution was limited in the United States to just twelve people outside the CIA. Inside the CIA, only twenty people were authorized access to Penkovsky's reports, on a strict need-to-know basis. (24:274-275) President Kennedy, who during 1961 was concerned that earlier Air Force estimates of Soviet missile strength sharply contradicted the intelligence community consensus, lost interest in the Air Force claims. The new evidence from Penkovsky and the Discoverer satellite imagery overwhelmed the unsubstantiated Air Force conjectures. Shifting from the idea of American inferiority to American superiority in strategic missiles would be a difficult public perception to change, especially since Kennedy himself had campaigned against Vice President Nixon, accusing the Republicans of allowing the Soviets to surpass the United States in missiles and nuclear weapons. (24:280) But this knowledge undoubtedly strengthened Kennedy's position when negotiating with Soviet Premier Khrushchev in the fall of 1962.

Using knowledge gained directly from Penkovsky, the CIA could reliably estimate how long it would take to complete the missile installations and when the sites would become operational. Monitoring construction of power, fuel lines, launching booms and other equipment at the launching sites provided critical information that gave President Kennedy three extra days to discuss and decide how to proceed with Khrushchev. The

larger issue at the time was whether or not to order a first strike against the missile sites in Cuba and destroy the Cuban Air Force. With the aid of the material Penkovsky delivered, the CIA could assure the President that there was time to think, plan, and execute. Then Deputy Director for Operations of CIA (later DCI), Richard Helms later commented, "I don't know of any single instance where intelligence was more immediately valuable than at this time. Penkovsky's material had a direct application because it came right into the middle of the decision making process." (24:335)

In the series of meetings between the ExComm members and the President to assess Soviet intentions and capabilities, from 16 October to 2 November, when the Soviets dismantled the missiles and destroyed their sites, Penkovsky's intelligence information played a critical role in assessing the readiness of the Soviet missiles in Cuba and the overall Soviet nuclear strength. CIA analysts were able to understand what was presented to them because Penkovsky had provided the basic information upon which to build their judgments. Deputy Director for Intelligence, Ray Cline, who was in charge of preparing briefing packages for the President and the ExComm, believed that the initial imagery of the missile sites at San Cristobal, which were fully understandable only because of Penkovsky, was the key to the successful resolution of the crisis. (24:336)

Along with these successes in intelligence there were certainly some failures. For example, it has not been conclusively determined to this day whether any of the nuclear warheads had actually arrived in Cuba by mid October 1962. The United States intelligence community had to assume that the Soviet nuclear warheads were present, but did not know for certain. CIA estimates of Soviet combat troop strength in Cuba were greatly underestimated, intelligence estimates of 12,000 to 16,000 Soviet military personnel were provided to the President and the ExComm. Actual numbers were between 40,000 and 42,000, a significant difference if an American invasion was deemed necessary. (13:36-37)

Additionally, U.S. beliefs that no short-range tactical nuclear weapons were present in Cuba appear to have been wrong as well. Recent Soviet evidence suggests that nine nuclear warheads for tactical missiles were on the island, and local Soviet commanders had the authority to fire these weapons without further orders from Moscow in the event of an American invasion. (20:149)

There was intelligence which provided concrete evidence that nuclear warheads for the Cuban missiles had been loaded on the Soviet cargo ship Poltava, one of the large-hatch freighters that was en route to Cuba at the time the naval quarantine was imposed by President Kennedy. As with all of the missile transporting ships, the Poltava, as it passed through the Bosphorus, declared for a false destination, Algeria, and had a false cargo manifest. The Poltava was only a few days sailing from Cuba when the quarantine was imposed. The Poltava turned back toward the Black Sea on 24 October, along with four ships carrying missiles and associated equipment, and eleven additional ships with other military equipment. (13:38-39)

It must be noted too, that failing to detect the packing, loading, and transport of the missiles from the Soviet Union to Cuba in the first place was, in and of itself, an intelligence failure. The intervening time period between the shootdown of Francis Gary Powers' U-2 and the operational deployment of the Discoverer satellite system (coupled with the outstanding reporting from Colonel Penkovsky), created a period of blindness for U.S. intelligence. However, this does not excuse the failure to photograph the Soviet Union's Black Sea ports and merchant cargo shipments through the Mediterranean to Cuba. These failures could have been significant; luckily, they were not.

Overall, U.S. intelligence deserves high marks for its efforts before, during, and after the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the midst of the crisis, it provided the President and his advisors with very accurate, detailed information on the sequence of events as they occurred, and could even predict future events, such as the timing of Soviet missile activation. Armed with such information, the President knew when the Soviets were lying

and could expose their duplicity. After the Soviet agreement to remove the missiles, intelligence platforms accurately verified their withdrawal.

## Continuing Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

### Chapter Five

#### Conclusions

It was noted above that President Kennedy decided to limit both the objectives he would pursue in the Cuban Missile Crisis and the means he would employ on their behalf. The overall effectiveness of crisis management depends on satisfying political goals while controlling the military measures used to attain them. In this regard, President Kennedy was highly successful. He effectively integrated national, political, diplomatic, and military elements by carefully selecting the membership of his executive committee (ExComm) who helped him manage the crisis. Kennedy largely controlled the urge to micro-manage military operations, allowing the established command and control elements to perform their duties. The tempo and momentum of the crisis, critical if one is to "manage" a crisis, were controlled throughout the incident, ensuring that his opposite number in the Kremlin knew what was happening at all times. This allowed both men to think over their options, exchange diplomatic correspondence when necessary, and to control raging emotions on both sides. Kennedy carefully selected appropriate military operations that were consistent with his political objectives and diplomatic statements. Each U.S. military escalation or preparation was clear and highly visible, signaling American resolve and consistency. Ultimately, the strategic alert to DefCon-2, which the President ordered upon the Cuban missiles becoming operational, forced a choice for Khrushchev, but at the same time, did allow him a way out of the box. Thankfully, Khrushchev blinked.

War was avoided because the incentive to avoid it remained powerful throughout the crisis, opportunities for avoiding escalation were available, and were not abandoned due to the skill of the two national leaders involved. Khrushchev and Kennedy behaved with sober prudence and reasonable skill to extricate themselves from the threatening

confrontation they found themselves, unlike President Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who in 1950 imprudently escalated the U.S. objective in Korea to the unification of the two Koreas by force of arms after the North Korean army was routed by General MacArthur in his advance to the Yalu River.

Similarly, however ambitious Khrushchev's plans might have been when he decided to install missiles in Cuba, he quickly saw the need to pull back his cargo ships and submarines and settle for whatever he could safely gain once confronted by President Kennedy's tough military response. It appears that each leader was aware that events could quickly spin out of their individual control if the utmost care were not exercised, and both leaders were determined that this should not occur.

While it is true that President Kennedy bought the crisis to the brink of war, and that Khrushchev advanced to the very edge with him, Kennedy was ultimately able to provide an acceptable carrot to the Soviet leader, without having to use his formidable military stick. Both sides agreed to step back from the brink, somewhat breathless at the thought of how close they had come to mutual disaster.

One of the more dangerous threats to effective crisis management was the shooting down of an American U-2 on 27 October. This action nearly triggered a U.S. decision to retaliate against one or more of the Soviet SAM sites in Cuba, a development that would have placed the burden of continued peace in Khrushchev's pudgy hands. Equally troubling were the rules of engagement upon which the Soviet navy was operating, if their orders offered as much autonomy as the SAM battery commander, some of the U.S. Navy quarantine efforts might have ended in armed conflict between the two forces. For whatever reason, Soviet naval commanders exercised more restraint than their land based SAM counterparts.

There are many lessons that can yet be gleaned from study of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Additional information surfaces with each passing day, most notably from the archives of the former Soviet Union. Central to any lesson taken from this incident is the

idea that strategic intelligence is critically important to national security decision makers at any time, but especially in the midst of crisis. In the process of conducting the research through the many books and materials for this paper, I was constantly struck by the options that were made available to the President through the knowledge gained from U.S. strategic intelligence sources. Without the U-2 aircraft, developed by the CIA in the early 1950's, the startling imagery of Soviet missile installations would not have existed to alert the West to the crisis in the first place. If GRU Colonel Penkovsky had not been as persistent as he was in contacting Western intelligence officials and volunteering his considerable services, American analysts would have been unable to determine the operational status of the Cuban missile sites, thereby potentially increasing the argument of those Kennedy advisors who advocated a first strike or an invasion of Cuba. It is sobering to think of the consequences if Nikita Khrushchev had been able to complete the installation of missiles in Cuba without the United States learning of the operation prior to its completion.

Why should we continue to study the Cuban Missile Crisis? Because the very "uniqueness" of the missile crisis argues for its continued importance as a historical case study. The crisis was, in fact, the most acute and dangerous confrontation during the Cold War. It was, and remains, the closest the United States and the Soviet Union ever came to a nuclear exchange. Hence, if we are to understand the dynamics of crisis escalation in the nuclear age, then there is no better (actually there is no other) historical source other than the Cuban Missile Crisis. Fundamentally, the missile crisis, like it or not, has been and will continue to remain a significant historical paradigm.

In the intervening thirty-three years since the Cuban Missile Crisis, despite serious international friction's, there has not been another incident like it. In geopolitics, the interests of great powers often collide. Crisis management is necessary if crises arise, but crisis prevention and crisis avoidance based on political restraint and accommodations of differences are much to be preferred. Arms control agreements, strategic arms reduction



agreements, and improved communications are all positive steps along this pathway. So is knowing what the other fellow is about to do.

## Map of the Island of Cuba

Map of the United States, includes the Gulf of Mexico and Cuba

## Map of North and South America

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